

Auden's Funeral

By Stephen Spender

I

One among friends who stood above your grave
I cast a clod of earth from those heaped there
Down on the great brass-handled coffin lid.
It rattled on the oak like a door knocker
And at that sound I saw your face beneath
Wedged in an oblong shadow under ground.
Flesh creased, eyes shut, jaw jutting
And on the mouth a grin: triumph of one
Who has escaped from life-long colleagues roaring
For him to join their throng. He's still half with us
Conniving slyly, yet he knows he's gone
Into that cellar where they'll never find him,
Happy to be alone, his last work done,
Word freed from world, into a different wood.

II

But we, with feet on grass, feeling the wind
Whip blood up in our cheeks, walk back along
The hillside road we earlier climbed today
Following the hearse and tinkling village band.
The white October sun circles Kirchstetten
With colours of chrysanthemums in gardens,
And bronze and golden under wiry boughs,
A few last apples gleam like jewels.
Back in the village inn, we sit on benches
For the last toast to you, the honoured ghost
Whose absence now becomes incarnate in us.
Tasting the meats, we imitate your voice
Speaking in flat benign objective tones
The night before you died. In the packed hall
You are your words. Your listeners see
Written on your face the poems they hear
Like letters carved in a tree's bark
The sight and sound of solitudes endured.
And looking down on them, you see
Your image echoed in their eyes

Enchanted by your language to be theirs.
And then, your last word said, halloing hands
Hold up above their heads your farewell bow.
Then many stomp the platform, entreating
Each for his horde, your still warm signing hand.
But you have hidden away in your hotel
And locked the door and lain down on the bed
And fallen from their praise, dead on the floor.

III

(Ghost of a ghost, of you when young, you waken
In me my ghost when young, us both at Oxford.
You, the tow-haired undergraduate
With jaunty liftings of the head.
Angular forward stride, cross-questioning glance,
A Buster Keaton-faced pale gravitas.
Saying aloud your poems whose letters bit
Ink-deep into my fingers when I set
Them up upon my five-pound printing press:

‘An evening like a coloured photograph

A music stultified across the water

The heel upon the finishing blade of grass.’)

IV

Back to your room still growing memories –
Handwriting, bottles half-drunk, and us – drunk –
Chester, in prayers, still prayed for your ‘dear C.’,
Hunched as Rigoletto, spluttering
Ecstatic sobs, already slanted
Down towards you, his ten-months-hence
Grave in Athens – remembers
Opera, your camped-on heaven, odourless
Resurrection of your bodies singing
Passionate duets whose chords resolve
Your rows in harmonies. Remembers
Some tragi-jesting wish of yours and puts
‘Siegfried’s Funeral March’ on the machine.

Wagner who drives out every thought but tears –
Down-crashing drums and cymbals cataclysmic
End-of-world brass exalt on drunken waves
The poet's corpse borne on a bier beyond
The foundering finalities, his world,
To that Valhalla where the imaginings
Of the dead makers are their lives.
The dreamer sleeps forever with the dreamed.